

Bonding with Your New Rescue Rat(s)

By Sandy M

Many rats are willing to hand over their whole heart as soon as they meet their new human, but that doesn't always happen. Some rescue rats have learned hard lessons from difficult pasts and need some time to learn to trust. That doesn't make them any less deserving of love or any less willing to give it. What they need is time, patience, and compassion to feel safe enough to trust their hearts to a new human.

How long it takes to bond with a rescue rat will depend on several factors including the rat's past experiences or lack thereof, their individual temperament, and your willingness to let them form a relationship at their own pace. It might take time and it may be different from what you expect, but there's no such thing as a rat being too old to form an emotional relationship with a new human. Here are a few tips to help you build the foundation to a trusting bond with your new rescue rat.

Provide a calm environment

In their new home, your new rat should be placed in a quiet, secure cage with plenty of places to hide. A place to decompress. Inside their cage, rats need at least one private area they can retreat to per rat for example; a cardboard box, a hammock or a Sputnik. Add fall breakers, a chew toy and a few perches. Your new rat needs places to hide, climb, dig, forage and rest. Be sure to leave some room for maneuvering a transport container while providing for these needs.

<https://youtu.be/PPR-cueaJq4?si=TGCzJQbvvV6pdgN9>

A recently adopted rat in a new environment with humans they don't know is often stressed, anxious or fearful. Let him settle in for a couple of days, without trying to handle them or pick them up. DO NOT clean the cage, change the litter box, hammocks etc while your new rat is in the cage during this settling in period. Moving to a new environment with strange humans can be very overwhelming. Combine this with a rat's poor vision and accidents can happen. To prevent this and start building trust it's important to give them the space they need to adjust and feel safe.

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Talk to him a lot from outside the cage and toss treats to him. You can also gently rattle the food in its container, each time you feed him.

Don't try to give them treats directly from your hand during this period. If they want the treats but are afraid of your hand they may grab them roughly and your finger could unintentionally get grabbed too. If you give treats, tossing them on the cage floor allows your rats to get them without potentially feeling conflicted. They will still know who gave it to them.

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Spend time together away from the cage

After a couple days remove your new friend from their cage using a transport container. When working with extremely fearful rats or rats with a bite history it's a good idea to protect your fingers with a glove or cover the opening with a piece of cardboard.

<https://youtu.be/wN2THTMjvJE?si=ml-skJb-rz4QPf9E>

Bring them into your play area and sit quietly with them. A “Cheerios party” is a great way to start interacting on their terms while they get to know you. At first just tossing Cheerios nearby and slowly transition to taking them from your hand. Be sure there are Cheerios available without having to take them from your hand at first so they don't feel conflicted.

<https://youtu.be/hSAxyQs47BY>

Once they are comfortable enough to sit with you and eat the Cheerios rather than running away to eat them you are ready to try petting and handling. When you begin handling, talk softly to your rat throughout and offer your special treats. It doesn't matter to the rat what you say, but at this point your new fur buddy should find your voice reassuring.

“Pay attention to your rat's body language.”

Pay attention to your rat's body language. If at any point during approaching or handling your rat becomes very still, frozen, looks poofy, bristled (fur stands up) or starts huffing they are trying to tell you something. These are signs that your rat may be getting very frightened and you need to take a step back and slow things down a bit.

When they are ready to be picked up the best way is by scooping gently from underneath and/or the sides. Rats are prey animals and thus tend to find it unpleasant to be approached by a claw-like appendage from above. NEVER pick a rat up by the tail! This is terrifying to a rat and can cause serious injuries to the tail or spine.

Once you pick them up, hold them gently in your arms for a few seconds. Some rats are more comfortable walking from one hand to the other or sitting on your shoulder rather than being cradled and that's fine too. Avoid squeezing or restraining them as it can be uncomfortable and frightening. Keep it brief because the rat may not enjoy the experience the first few times. If they seem relaxed, you can begin gently "scritch" (imitation grooming) the rat's neck and shoulders. Do your best to not let anything frighten him while you are holding him. No loud noises, no cats, no dogs, etc.

Many people use a bonding pouch or reverse hoodie, carrying their new rat around in safety, while also providing a place to "hide" while they get used to them. If they enjoy it, you can carry your rat around in this way while talking to them. Some rats may even fall asleep in a pouch. At the end of each short handling session, offer him a treat.

Be a Reliable Human

When a rat ends up at a rescue, their trust was broken at least once before or perhaps they never had that bond before. Whether they were given up by a previous family or an uncontrollable situation led to a heartbreaking separation, something happened to change that rat's life. That shift in circumstances taught the rat an unfortunate lesson, things and people they love aren't always reliable. Their confidence in the good things may have been shaken, and they need someone to renew their trust in humans. You need to show them that despite all of life's unknowns, they can count on you/humans to be there to care for them.

Develop a daily routine.

Keep your interactions consistent and predictable. With time, they'll learn what to expect, and they'll begin to trust you enough to form an emotional bond. Offering special yummy treats several times a day helps him associate you with good things.

Let Go of Expectations

Whether you have shared an unbreakable bond with a previous heart rat or love following stories of rats bonded with their humans on social media, now is the time to forget those expectations. Every rat is an individual, and every relationship with their human is unique. It's not fair to compare what you have with a new rescue rat with an idealized vision you have in your mind. Keep your heart open to falling in love with this special fur buddy and their own special personality and charm. It's worth waiting for.